Midnight Barbershop
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Midnight Barbershop

by bethanyisinjail

Summary

The last month in the Human Realm has been anything but easy for any of them, but Hunter in particular has had a really hard time adjusting. It's a completely new schedule, with completely new people, in a completely new place from before. As much of an improvement as it is on where he was before, he still can't seem to let go of everything that hurt him back in the Boiling Isles.

Or everyone, for that matter.

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Hunter forcibly swallows the next sob, despite how nauseous it makes him feel. That'll be the only one, he tells himself, he's not going to cry over something he caused.

Although, he doesn't get to wallow long, as a moment later there's a knock at the door, paired with a soft, familiar voice.

"Hunter?"

"

Notes

heyyyy this is my first time writing anything owl house but im so head over heels for this show and huntlow it isn't even funny so of course obligatory haircut scene fic ft. little loving brat and wingman flapjack i love him so much

About a month has gone by since the five teenagers stumbled into the human realm. About a month since Luz led them back to her house, and her mother took them all in without any questions. About a month since their home address has become the Noceda living room, spread out on the mattress and one sleeping bag that Mrs. Noceda was able to gather for them. It's been the same orientation every night: Gus on the couch, Luz and Amity sharing the spare mattress from the top bunk of Luz's bed, and Hunter and Willow sharing the one, unzipped and laid-flat sleeping bag. The first night they were here, after some arguing, Willow took it for herself, but then profusely apologized to Hunter the next morning for it. Mrs. Noceda tried to insist on buying another sleeping bag but they both assured her she didn't need to do that. It was unspoken, but the two of them agreed she'd done enough for them. Hunter tried to keep his distance from her at night, getting as close to the edge of the sleeping bag as he could, although recently it hasn't been working too well. Willow has developed the tendency of backing up and sleeping back to back with him when they lay down, something Hunter *really* wishes he minded a lot more. But, if he's honest, sleeping right next to Willow really isn't all that bad.

Sleep was a little bit of an exaggeration, though.

Hunter certainly wasn't the only one who had been struggling to sleep recently. With the exception of Gus, who was still in a little bit of disbelief about being here and promptly crashed when his head hit the pillow, everyone had had at least a couple of sleepless nights since getting here. Although, *none* of them were as bad as Hunter.

He'd stay up for three days straight, doing nothing but research, reading all these strange human books to try and figure out *any* kind of connection between here and the Boiling Isles. Every few nights he'd crash, though, just to wake up in the morning more exhausted than he was before and do it all over again. The rare nights he slept weren't pretty, either, and he'd wake up practically hyperventilating at least once or twice, and if that's all that happened he was lucky. As a consequence, he was up to see almost every one of the others' sleepless nights, watch them as they got startled by nightmares, and try his best to brush off their eventual worry as to why *he* was always up. Really, it barely fazed him at this point.

One night, though, he chose the exact *wrong* nightly reading material.

Hunter didn't dare move from where he was laying next to Willow, back to her, until he was sure everyone was sound asleep. They had been playing some weird game for hours before that, dance something? Just groove? Something along those lines, Hunter wasn't really paying attention. It involved a *lot* of swinging their arms around and jumping, something he really didn't want any part of. Willow tried to drag him into it but he insisted on just watching. He wasn't doing whatever *that*

was, because it *certainly* was not the kind of dance he ever learned. It did serve well in tiring everyone out, though, so their nighttime routine of avoiding going to bed was greatly shortened. So, once he was sure Willow was *not* going to back up and lay right against him, and no one else would notice it, he gets up, walking over to the bookshelf in the living room that they've stocked with potential research material, grabbing one of the dull, gray books he has yet to touch yet. He carefully tiptoes his way into the bathroom down the hall, very conscious to make no noise at all. The moment he shuts the door and turns on the light, squinting a moment to adjust to the brightness, he feels Flapjack settle on his shoulder, Hunter reaching up to give him a scratch on the head. His hand drops when he looks down though, staring in shock at the book he randomly grabbed.

The Witch Hunters of Gravesfield

Every ounce of him tells him to just put the book down, go back to laying on his joint sleeping bag, and call it a night right now. But he *can't* , something comes over him and he cracks it open, flipping through the pages before one, particularly colorful one stands out to him. On one side is a very detailed drawing, taking up the whole page, of the Wittebane brothers, seemingly around the age he is now. Hunter's eyes immediately begin to scan the other side of the page, detailing how Philip had always looked up to his older, protective brother. How he'd always displayed a want to appease him, show him he could help too in their countless endeavors, how people had seen Philip *always* try to keep his brother close to him and how much he *loved* him. The photo of the brothers stares at him, the taller one being practically a spitting image of Hunter. He looks up, his reflection in the mirror catching his eye. He looks disheveled, his long hair a mess, and for a moment, all he sees is Caleb. Almost as quickly as that image fades, his *uncle* replaces it, with his face scarred in green and his horrible, menacing smile. Hunter immediately drops the book and stumbles backward, clumsily falling down beside the toilet, barely catching himself from slamming his head into the wall and making a ton of noise.

The thought of him in the mirror overtakes *everything* in him, settling heavily on his chest as he fails to get a good, calming breath in. He tries everything, the counting Gus taught him, the grounding things Luz told him about, focusing on the feeling of Flapjack headbutting his cheek. The feeling of his hair just crawls all over him, combined with the horrible image of his uncle in the mirror he just can't do it. It's a split-second, stupid decision, but he finds himself clamoring off the ground, rummaging through drawers until he finds the shiny, silver scissors he *knows* are in here. He saw Mrs. Noceda take them out just the other day when Amity asked to clean up the ends of her hair a bit.

After the third drawer he finally sees them, and without hesitation he grabs them, holds up a piece of hair, and just chops it right off. It's reckless and messy, but he *can't stop* . He picks up the pace as the image in the mirror starts to finally look more like him, ignoring as Flapjack twitters at him more and more concerned as Hunter begins to hack off bigger chunks. In the midst of his chopping panic, though, he nicks himself, sucking air in between his teeth and putting a hand on the spot, although careful not to drop the scissors. The stinging pain draws him out of the trance he's in, though, and he begins to feel the hair *all* over him. He hates it he hates it he hates it so much it's everywhere and it's so rough and he can't stop touching it-

Flapjack pecks at his arm, clearly worried. Hunter just shakes his head, though, breathlessly replying to him, "I'm fine, I'm fine."

"No" , Flapjack tweets, *"Not fine, bad."*

"I'm *fine* ," Flapjack," Hunter tries to insist, tossing the scissors on the counter and desperately trying to brush himself off. He begins to bounce on the tips of his toes in an effort to give him *some*

other form of externalizing how *horrible* he feels right now, but it just keeps building. As if that wasn't bad enough, he hears the sound of something pecking at wood, looking over to see Flapjack pecking at the door to the bathroom.

"Stop! Stop Flapjack stop!" Hunter whisper-yells, flapping his hand back and forth as he tries to shoo the bird away. He's insistent, though, Hunter figuring it's just easier to let him out than fight him right now. "Fine, buddy, fine," Hunter concedes, opening up the door and letting the small bird fly out. Hunter doesn't shut it behind him, though, wanting to let him get back in if he wants. He does close it enough so no light escapes, though, not wanting to wake anyone up.

Standing by the door gives him a view of the *mess* he's made of the Noceda's bathroom. There's hair everywhere, bloody scissors on the counter, and he feels the overwhelmed feeling already consuming him somehow triple. He doesn't know what to do, his legs starting to feel like jelly under him. He cups a hand over his mouth as he stares at the disaster his stupid breakdown is causing, unable to help when a strangled sob escapes his throat. He forcibly swallows the next sob, despite how nauseous it makes him feel. That'll be the only one, he tells himself, he's not going to cry over something *he* caused.

Although, he doesn't get to wallow long, as a moment later there's a knock at the door, paired with a soft, familiar voice.

"Hunter?"

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Willow stirs awake as she feels something pulling at her hair, reaching back and patting the sleeping bag behind her on instinct. There's nothing there, though, which isn't super surprising, although when she sits up she's surprised to not see Hunter at all, rather looking over to still see Flapjack pulling at her. It's concerning, because normally wherever Hunter is, Flapjack is quick to follow. Yet, Hunter is nowhere to be seen, so she wastes no time standing up, looking over at Flapjack to her right and seeing him begin to fly towards the hallway. Willow grabs her glasses off the end table and carefully follows after him, rounding the corner to see light flooding from under the bathroom doorway, hearing the sound of someone crying inside. Her first instinct is to rush over and open the door, but she knows that's going to do more harm than good. Instead, she slowly walks up, lightly knocking on the door and quietly calling inside.

"Hunter?" She calls, hearing the room inside go completely silent. She waits a minute, but when nothing happens she knocks again, "Hunter, it's Willow, are you ok? Can I come in?"

She waits again, this time rewarded with the door opening a bit, Willow taking that as an invitation to push it open all the way. Before she can see inside, Flapjack flies in, Willow pushing open the door completely to find him settled on an extremely disheveled Hunter's shoulder. His hair is absolutely everywhere, choppily cut and strewn about all over his shirt, his socks, the sink, the ground, *everything* . He's got a hand cupped over his mouth with tears running down his face, but he's completely frozen in fear. Willow just gives him the warmest smile she can, shutting the door behind her.

"Hey, are you ok? What happened?" She asks, causing Hunter to cross his arms.

"Nothing," He mutters, "It's fine, sorry."

“No, you don’t need to be sorry,” She takes a slow, small step forward, “I don’t know what happened in here but I can help if you want? You know, tidy up everything and uh, that,” She points up at his head, Hunter looking up towards the top of his head, shrinking down a bit.

“No, no, I don’t need it,” He steps back, his voice clearly edging on frantic, “I’ll fix it myself.”

“Hunter, please,” She presses, “Let me help, you don’t need to fix all of this yourself. I’m more than happy to help. So, please? Can I help?”

Hunter looks off from her, Flapjack twittering something at him. Hunter shoots the bird a look but, after a glance back at Willow he sheepishly nods, lips pressed into a very tight, fine line. Willow *knows* that look, and she knows immediately what’s going to happen after it.

Hunter lets out a heartbreaking, strangled sob that gives way to a stream of tears. Willow moves to put down the lid of the toilet to give him a place to sit. Hunter doesn’t say anything, just sitting down and curling his arms around his stomach. Willow crouches down next to him, reaching up and hovering a hand a couple of inches from his shoulder, not touching him yet. Before she can even as if it’s ok, though, he reaches over and puts her hand on his arm, Willow taking that as approval to touch him. She rubs a hand up and down his arm, pressing hard like she knows he likes. It’s hard to get Hunter to admit *anything* about him when he’s upset, but it slipped out once after a particularly bad nightmare right after they got here how much he likes pressure, and Willow has stored that information away for safekeeping, such as moments like this.

Hunter leans into the touch more heavily than normal, Willow jumping the gun a bit and just asking him, “Do you want a hug?”

Hunter looks over at her timidly, although something about his expression is almost longing. He doesn’t say anything, though, or indicate an answer at all. After a moment of waiting, she asks again.

“Do you want a hug? I’d love to give you one, you just have to tell me,” She tells him, Hunter’s tear-filled eyes dancing around the room a minute before he looks back at her and gives her the smallest nod, Willow smiling anyway. She pauses a moment, though, working out in her head how she’s going to do this. They’re not on the same level at all, so she decides to let him choose. “We can stand up or sit on the ground, I’m perfectly fine with both,” She tells him, Hunter pushing himself off of the toilet and less than gracefully landing on the ground, Willow sitting down completely wasting no time opening her arms to him. Hunter almost falls against her, Willow mildly worried about how clearly worked up he is. She does what she knows works, though, and holds him nice and tight, feeling him grab on just as hard as a means of affirming that what she’s doing is ok. It’s a bit hard to sustain but she tries her best, and as time goes on Hunter’s cries become significantly less frantic and desperate. Flapjack helps, too, fluttering next to Hunter and twittering things to him, although Willow doesn’t know what they are. Reassurances, likely, or at least something to remind him he’s ok.

It takes a few minutes but eventually he calms down, breathing evening out and his death grip on Willow loosening. The moment he starts to pull away she lets go, not wanting to push any boundaries with him. If any of the others knew that Hunter *willingly* hugged her semi-regularly they’d be shocked, so she doesn’t want to ruin this for him.

“Are you alright?” She asks, very quietly, “Do you feel ok?”

He nods, “I’m- I’m ok, you can go back to bed.”

“No, I’m not going back to bed, I’m not going to leave you here to deal with all of this, I’m here to

help you," She assures him.

"But I can deal with it," He tries to dismiss her again, but Willow stays firm.

"I'm sure you can but you don't have to, I *really* want to help you, Hunter," She states, "I care about you a lot, and I'm not going to leave you with all of this going on. Besides, if I really didn't want to I would have just ignored Flapjack coming to get me and stayed in bed. I'm no professional but I can help clean up your hair a bit if that's ok?"

Hunter stares at her almost blankly for a moment, his attention shifting to Flapjack when the bird chirps at him. Hunter hums at him, but turns back to Willow and nods, "I- Uh- Yes, please."

"Of course," Willow stands up and offers him a hand, smiling down at him. Hunter barely cracks the smallest smile, but she notices it. She helps him up and he sits back down on the toilet lid, Flapjack fluttering down into his lap as Willow grabs the scissors and starts by just looking around Hunter's head, surveying what she has to work with. The extent of her experience cutting hair is her own, and his is *so* much different than just a trim. He's made a mess of his head, the hair jagged and uneven, clearly just recklessly hacked at. Although, she's surprised to see on the side of his neck facing away from her, a cut dripping blood down onto his white sleeping shirt.

"Hunter, what happened here?" She asks, but Hunter just puts a hand on it and moves away from her.

"Nothing, just- got myself, it's fine. It doesn't hurt," He brushes her off.

"It's bleeding, let me put a bandage on it at least," She says, Hunter looking back at her a moment before relenting, dropping his hand into his lap. Willow turns to the mirror on the wall, which, fascinatingly, she came to find a couple of weeks ago is actually also a cabinet. She presses on it and it swings open, Willow reaching up to grab the box of human 'bandaids' on the second to top shelf. She takes one out, just a plain, tan one, and puts them back, shutting the cabinet again. She sets it down on the sink and tries to remember what she's seen Luz and her mom do to dress cuts like this. Bandages are not like they are in the Boiling Isles, they don't just clean and heal the wounds themselves. She knows she has to do that, so she grabs a small wad of toilet paper and wets it a bit, walking up to the side of Hunter's neck the cut is on.

"Can I touch this?" She asks, Hunter nodding. Willow begins to dab the cut clean, wiping away some of the dried blood and pressing a bit on the cut to stop more from coming out. She's always shocked by how he takes pain, he doesn't even flinch even though she feels like she's pressing too hard. He just sits there and takes it.

Once the cut stops bleeding, Willow throws out the bloody toilet paper and grabs the bandage, leaning in and carefully putting it over the small, healing cut. She smiles at her work when she finishes, looking over to see Hunter staring up at her, mouth slightly open and what she swears is blush on his cheeks. He snaps out of it a second later, though, muttering just a quiet, "Thank you."

"Mhm, it's good as new," She tells him as she tosses out the packaging, grabbing the scissors and continuing her assessment of his hair. This time, though, she asks him, "Is it ok if I run my hands through your hair a bit? I uh, just want to try to make a better plan to even it out than just cutting."

"Mhm, yeah," He quickly nods, leaning his elbows on his knees as she begins to card her hands through his hair, straightening out everything the best she can. She takes her time, too, because she feels how he leans into her hand every time she brushes her fingers through his hair, catching his content smile in the mirror. She'll have to note that as something else he finds comforting.

“Ok, uh, I don’t know how to cut hair but I’m gonna try my best, ok?” She tells him, “You’re not allowed to laugh.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Captain,” He replies, looking up at her and giving her a real, toothy smile. Willows immediately feels herself blush at the sadly *very* rare sight of his smile. He let it slip to her once a long time ago, back when they were still texting, how he’s not the ‘smiling type’. She wishes she could go back in time and tell him he should be.

She begins to cut away at his hair, evening everything the best she possibly can. It’s not much, but it makes his hair look less like *he* cut it and more like he *had it* cut. Although, she doesn’t do much before he starts cringing, lifting his shoulders up and scrunching his face up tight. Something is clearly bothering him, and although the first couple of times she ignores it, after he almost makes her make a really bad cut she asks him.

“Are you ok” Is something bothering you?” Willow asks, stepping around to stand right in front of him. Hunter looks up at her and shakes his head, though.

“It’s nothing, sorry, it won’t happen again,” He tells her, almost bowing his head at her when he looks down into his lap.

“Are you sure?” She asks, but he just nods again, still looking down. She decides to trust him, continuing to cut his hair some more, although the next time he scrunches up his shoulders and moves his head she almost snips the tip of his left ear. On instinct, she snaps at him, although not in anger.

“Hunter!” She exclaims, Hunter turns to look back at her, and before she can even say anything else he stumbles off the toilet seat away from her and immediately hits the floor, Flapjack squeaking and flying away to avoid him falling, settling on the sink. He scrambles to turn and face her, pure fear in his eyes. Willow feels horrible, but she takes a deep breath before she approaches him again.

“I’m sorry, Hunter, I’m sorry,” She apologizes, walking up a bit closer and sitting down with some distance between the two of them, “I’m sorry, Hunter, I didn’t mean to yell, I just got startled because you flinched and I didn’t expect it and I almost snipped at your ear. I didn’t want you to get hurt, that’s the only reason I yelled, nothing you did wrong.”

Hunter just stares at her, seemingly holding his breath, Willow moving closer so she’s sitting right in front of him. She hovers a hand over his knee, which is pulled up to his chest, Hunter surprisingly putting his legs down and out on either side of him instead, putting Willow between his outstretched legs. Willow pulls her hand back, looking at him apprehensively to see what he wants her to do. He stares at her for a long moment before pushing himself forward a bit, getting right in front of Willow, almost touching her. She stares at him analytically a moment before deciding to just offer.

“Do you want a hug?” She asks, Hunter nodding and immediately moving to let her draw him in. She moves to sit with her legs out to the side, tightly hugging him like before. He melts right into her, Willow holding him close as if it’ll make up for the fear she caused him. It’s comforting to know that the one stupid mistake didn’t ruin her relationship with him. He still trusts her, which is very relieving right now.

After a minute she hears him mutter, “Sorry for running, it won’t happen again.”

“Hunter,” She sadly replies, “No, don’t apologize, don’t *ever* apologize for reacting like that. If it happens again that’s completely ok, you aren’t expected to be perfect all the time. I don’t know

what happened or what you were told back on the Boiling Isles but whatever it is it's stupid. You don't ever have to be better or anything like that with me, I promise."

Hunter stills, Willow worrying she said the wrong thing. He begins to cry after a moment, though, tucking his face right into the side of her neck, getting as close as he possibly can to her. She's definitely blushing *hard* , but she ignores it in favor of holding him close, squeezing him with some hopefully grounding pressure. It works pretty quickly, too, because only after a couple of minutes he pulls back, their faces right in front of each other. Hunter lights up red, immediately moving to sit back more, Willow unable to do anything but smile. The two sit in a moment of awkward silence, Hunter looking anywhere but at Willow. She's surprised, though, when he suddenly blurts out.

"The hair," He tells her, Willow looking at him confused. He looks at her and analyzes her expression for a moment before repeating, "The hair bothers me."

"You mean that it was long?" She asks, Hunter shaking his head.

"No no, like, like the cut hair, on me," He describes, shrinking in on himself as he does, "I just- I hate the feeling of hair, It's- It's just bad, I don't know how to describe it but it makes me feel just so- tense and bad and crawly I guess? I don't know, it's so stupid-"

"No, it's not stupid at all," She stops him, "That's completely ok, to have things that make you feel like that. I don't know what it feels like but it doesn't matter, I know what you're saying and we can fix it. Thank you for telling me."

Hunter looks up at her almost surprised, the expression quickly replaced with one of relief, a content smile forming on his face. He goes to rub the back of his neck but quickly draws his hand back, almost like something electrified him. Willow knows what it is now, though, beckoning for him to come close as she moves over his leg to sit behind him.

"Let me dust it off for you, what I can get at least," She offers, Hunter easily agreeing and letting her sit behind him, trying her best to get off the hair she can from his neck. One of her hands dusts off the hair from his neck and shoulders, the other runs up and down his arm to give him another sensation to focus on. It works pretty well, too, Willow giving herself a figurative pat on the back for how ingenious that idea was.

Once she's done all she can without having him change, though, she goes back around to the front of him. "I got what I could, but why don't we finish the job so after you can change?"

"Mhm, yeah," He nods, Willow getting up first and helping him to his feet. He stands up too, much more stable this time, and walks over to sit back down where he was before. She picks back up the scissors and continues where she left off, which wasn't very far in. Hunter holds his cupped hands out towards the sink, Flapjack flying over and settling down in his hands, Hunter beginning to calmingly pet the small bird. As she cuts, too, she's making sure to keep the hair that falls away from him, brushing it off if it does fall onto his neck. While she works, though, she decides to see if she can learn a bit more about him while he's in a sharing mood.

"Is there anything else that bothers you like that? Or is it just hair?" She asks as genuinely as possible, "I've just never heard about it before, I'm interested."

"Yeah, uh, a lot of things," He admits, pausing before beginning to ramble, "I hate like rough and itchy things, rough sweaters are just, ooo," He twiddles his fingers in front of him, "It's just a bad feeling, I don't know why."

“Camila gave you some sweaters, didn’t she?” Willow asks, “Did you tell her you don’t like them?”

“No, no, no. I mean, most of them are ok but there are a couple that are a bit itchy but I manage it fine, really,” He assures her.

“You don’t need to wear things you don’t like,” Willow tells him as she leans down a bit to assess the pieces of his hair that she’s cutting.

“Eh, I’m used to it,” He shrugs, “It’s stupid, too, so it doesn’t need to be accommodated.”

“It’s not stupid, Hunter, not at all. No one who has ever told you that is right,” She scolds.

“Mmm,” He hums, clearly not convinced. It’s an ongoing battle, Willow reminds herself. After a beat of silence, Hunter speaks up again, “I don’t like a lot of foods, I’m a really particular eater. I don’t like anything that’s too crunchy in something soft or squishy or anything. Like, like that, uh, the rice I think, that Mrs. Noceda makes with those red pieces. I don’t like the red little squishy things. Mmm,” He tensely hums, Willow stopping a moment to let him physically cringe without cutting anything she doesn’t mean to. Once he slumps his shoulders again she goes back to working, commenting on what he said.

“But you ate that anyway, I remember it,” She recalls, “Why?”

“She made it for me,” He says as if that’s obvious, “I have to eat it.”

“No, you don’t at all,” Willow replies, “If you don’t like it then you can just eat something else. It’s not weird, I don’t think that Amity has touched the spicy meat Camila makes since we got here, whatever it’s called. She just doesn’t like it, and Camila has no problem with that. You aren’t like, I don’t know, throwing her food to the ground, it’s not disrespectful to just not eat something you don’t enjoy.”

Hunter stays quiet, Willow letting the silence just sit there a bit. After a moment, though, Hunter quietly asks, “Can I keep talking?”

“Mhm, of course,” She encourages, smiling as she moves around to cut the front of his hair, “My ears are ready to listen.”

She sees him smile, pausing a moment before continuing to ramble to her, “I also really don’t like some sounds but they don’t make me cringe or anything they just- Just some bad memories to them, but they aren’t the same. But I swear I’m not all bad things, there are some weird things I like the feeling of too, but they’re weird, nothing anyone would really regularly do- or at least that I know of. I don’t know, I’ve never really talked to other people other than you guys, so sometimes I don’t know what to say or how to say it or how people talk and how they say things and all that. Well, I guess I never did, not even when I was living at the castle. I misread what people were saying *all the time* , which is stupid because once they explain it everything makes so much sense but I just can’t learn it. I was never the smartest, so I guess that makes some sense but-”

“Woah, who said you aren’t smart?” She stops him, “Let me at them, I’ll change that.”

Hunter looks up at her confused, Willow stopping and stepping back to let him fully move his head to look up at her, still puzzled. “What?” He questions, “Sorry, I don’t understand, ‘at’?”

“Oh, it just means I want to like, fight them, in a sense. Like when you want to fight someone but someone else is holding you back, you’d say that,” She explains, Hunter now looking at her with a combination of shock and worry, “I was just joking, though. I won’t actually fight anyone.”

Hunter's expression shifts to relief, nodding and chuckling, "Oh, that makes sense. Thanks for uh, explaining it, sorry I didn't get it."

"It's completely ok," She assures him, going back to cutting the final portion of his hair, "You can always ask me to explain something, even if it's something someone else says I'm glad to help. Thank you for telling me too, so now I know! I like hearing new things about you, Hunter, I feel like I don't know enough."

"Oh, uh, there's not really a lot to me," He sheepishly replies, Willow just chuckling to herself about how red he gets. It makes her heart flutter a bit, but she tries not to get too excited. He's probably just embarrassed, and he's so pale that anything shows on him. Yeah, definitely that.

"Of course there is! I'm learning all these cool things about you and I know there's a lot more too," She answers.

"But what about you, Captain, what is there to you?" He asks, Willow smiling and thinking a minute.

"Hmm, I'm probably a lot less interesting, if I'm honest. I like hugs a lot, but you know that. I really like laying with people, I slept in the same bed as my dads for a long time and they're both pretty touchy people so I'm super comfortable with stuff like that, it never really bothers me. I like quiet, I used to tend to the plants in my room in quiet a lot, just the sounds of wind and birds and such outside. I *love* the sounds of the outside, I think they're just so calming and natural and nice, I don't know. I couldn't explain it. I spent a lot of time outside or by a window as a kid, just listening. My dads used to joke that if I did too much sitting and listening too hard my ears would grow," She almost keeps going, but a glance down at the confused look on Hunter's face makes her clarify, "They were just teasing me, though, they didn't mean that."

"Mhm," He hums, "That makes sense. Your ears didn't actually grow."

"No, no," She chuckles, "They didn't, but even if they did I would've kept doing it anyway. I love the outside, even boiling rain is really nice to listen to."

"Boiling rain?" He puzzles, "Why would you like that?"

"The sound of it is nice, maybe it'll rain here someday soon and we can sit by a window, I can show you," She offers, "If you're alright with that."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah I would- Or, or I'd be ok- with that, that is," He sputters out, Willow giving him a reassuring smile when he looks up at her. He relaxes, beginning to talk again, "I never went outside much, at least not to do anything enjoyable."

"Did you have a window?"

"Yes, but it was up high. You can't really hear anything out there anyway," He tells her, "Castle is kind of secluded, also over a huge, gaping moat. And gloomy, just- a bad place to be, I never really liked outside there."

"I wouldn't either, I remember visiting," Willow responds, "It's always thundering there, isn't it?"

"Mhm, all the time," He affirms, "It- It was hard to sleep sometimes, but you get over it quick. You never get much time to sleep, either, you go to bed late after missions and wake up at 6 each morning, it really tires you out if you don't sleep enough."

Willow feels a pang of guilt in her chest at his meek admission of how difficult things used to be,

and the part of her not mourning his childhood wants to wrap up Belos in her spikiest plants and squeeze him as hard as she can. Realistically, he deserves way worse than that for everything he put Hunter through, but that'll have to do.

"It's alright, though, now I get to go to bed whenever I want, so I get plenty of sleep," He proudly answers, Willow just smiling at the comment. It's an odd thing to be excited about, but it makes him happy so she won't complain. Neither of them gets to say anything else, though, because Willow finishes up cutting his hair the best she can, stepping back to admire her shoddy, clearly unprofessional work. She cut the bottom shorter like he's always had it, but it's still a bit shaggy. The top keeps laying flat, though Willow is not sure how to make it look more normal than this.

"Uh, well, I've done what I can," She nervously says, "I really think we should get Camila in the morning."

"No, no, we don't need to bother her at all, it can't be that bad," He tells her, getting up but leaving his hands clasped together to cup a sleeping Flapjack still in his hands. He walks up to the mirror and clearly visibly cringes. "Mmm, ok, it's rough."

"I tried my best," She wrings her hands together, "I'm sorry."

"No, it's ok, it's better than it was," He assures her, "But uh, maybe we might need help."

Willow laughs, "Alright, tomorrow morning we'll get Camila and see if she can help. But I don't want to touch it anymore tonight, I want to just leave it for now. I don't want to cut too much."

Hunter nods, looking in the mirror a moment before smiling, looking over at Willow and saying, "Thanks for the help, Willow."

Willow beams back at the sound of him saying her name, something he's only done once or twice. She feels herself blushing, too, but she ignores it and just nods, "Of course, I'm glad I could help."

"And thank you for talking to me, too, I- I liked it," He tells her, "I've never talked about that stuff before, it was- nice."

"And thank you for telling me! I really loved getting to know you more, even if it wasn't like, the perfect circumstances," She clasps her hands in front of her, the two of them awkwardly looking around a moment before Willow speaks up again. "Let me get some new clothes for you, and a broom and the uh, little thing for it too," She steps back, "Stay here, I'll grab it, it'll be quieter just me, and you have him to take care of," She points to Flapjack in his hands.

Hunter just nods, sitting back down on the toilet lid while Willow slips out of the room, going back into the living room and quietly making her way over to the bottom level of the shelf, where her clothes are stored. Everyone has found their own space to put their clothes, and although Willow considers herself pretty observant she has *no* idea where Hunter keeps his stuff. So, instead, an outfit from her closet will have to do for him. She picks out the most neutral clothes she owns, although she doesn't own much. She grabs a white shirt with a pattern of various flowers on it, and black, long pajama pants with white dots on them. It'll just have to do, Willow walking back out of the living room and into the hallway, going into the closet and taking out the broom and strange flat pan to catch the stuff in. She has no idea what it's called.

She goes back into the bathroom to see Hunter sitting with his elbows on his knees, head hanging as he takes a deep breath in. His head shoots up when she walks in, Willow's eyes widening in shock, "Oh, sorry, I should have knocked."

“Oh, no, it’s ok, sorry,” He sits up straighter, eyeing the clothes in her hands.

“Uh, so I don’t know where your clothes are, so I just bought you some of mine. They should fit you, I think, they’re a bit long on me so hopefully they fit you,” She tells him, “But I also brought this so I can clean a bit in case anyone else comes in here.”

Willow sets down the clothes on the sink, looking over confused when Hunter stands up and reaches out for the broom. “I can do it,” He tells her, Willow pulling the broom back and shaking her head.

“No, let me, you’ve had a rough night as it is,” She assures him, Hunter just sitting back down, watching quietly as Willow dusts up all the hair on the ground, which is thankfully at least all dry so it gets pretty easily swept up. She dumps it all into the garbage, and once she’s done all she can, she props the broom up in the corner of the room, figuring they’ll probably need it tomorrow too. When she finishes she looks back at Hunter, who is hunched over, petting Flapjack with one hand and holding him with the other. He seems to have zoned out at some point, Willow taking a moment to contemplate how to best drag him out of it. She’s been really doing well tonight with proving to Hunter that she cares about him and how he feels and that he can feel safe around her, she will *not* mess it up now.

So, very gently, she calls his name, “Hunter.”

His head snaps up, just like it did before, although this time he smiles. Willow can’t help but blush and smile back.

“I’m all done, everything is cleaned up,” She tells him, “Do you want me to leave you to change? I can wait for you outside the door or on our sleeping bag, either one.”

He sheepishly looks down at the floor, rocking on his feet a moment before looking back up at her and asking, “Outside the door please?”

“Alright! I’ll be right outside,” She tells him, savoring the smile he cracks when she agrees, his tooth gap barely peeking out from between his lips. She just returns the grin and walks out, shutting the door behind herself. She hears the lock click and waits patiently as Hunter changes. She toys with her hands as she waits, replaying the blur of events that just happened. She hates how she sheepishly smiles and blushes thinking about it. It was a *really* hard moment for Hunter and she’s standing outside blushing about how close he was, and how he told her all those things about him, and how he tucked his head *right* into her neck and leaned into her hands running through his hair. All of it makes her want to squeal like a little girl, she swears her crush on him was *never* this big.

He emerges from the room a minute later, wearing the pajamas she gave him, which fit surprisingly well. The shirt is a little short, and both the shirt and pants are decently baggy on him, but they work alright regardless. Although backlit from the bathroom, she can see him blushing, Flapjack perched on his shoulder, twittering in his ear.

“Shh, shh, shh Flapjack,” Hunter shushes him, looking over to Willow and whispering, “Sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” She puzzles, Hunter shrugging with his free shoulder. “Don’t be, whatever you’re sorry for you don’t need to be. Are you ready to go back to bed? It’s late.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, sorry for keeping-”

“No more sorries,” She stops him before he can even give a reason for why he’s sorry.

“Sor-”

“No more,” She lightly nudges him, Hunter smiling at her. Flapjack tweets something, Hunter looking at him and gritting his teeth and whispering to him.

“Flap you are *not* helpful,” He mutters, Flapjack tweeting something else before Hunter turns away from him, looking back at Willow but not saying anything.

“Back to bed?” She asks, Hunter nodding. She starts first, letting Hunter quietly follow behind her back to their joint sleeping bag. After putting her glasses back on the end table Willow lays down first, admittedly *wiped* from tonight’s fiasco. She looks up at Hunter sitting down next to her, looking down at her bundling up under her blankets. He doesn’t lay down, though. She looks at him confused, very quietly whispering, “Are you gonna lay down?”

He shrugs, “Later.”

“No, not later, you need sleep, lay down,” She tells him, Hunter staring at her a moment before complying, taking Flapjack off his shoulder and setting him on the sleeping bag next to him, laying down on his back next to Willow. She looks over at him, and when Hunter looks over their faces are very close, Willow ignoring it the best she can. “Goodnight, Hunter, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Uh, yeah, goodnight Captain,” He says, rolling over away from her. She hears him start furiously whispering something to Flapjack, but she can’t hear it. Instead, she rolls to lay on her side, too, backing up to press up to him, back to back. She indulges in the moment a bit, but it doesn’t take long for tiredness to tug at her.

It’s been a long night, and she and him *both* need a good night’s sleep.

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Hunter looks back over his shoulder when he hears Willow begin to stir behind him, seeing her look back over her shoulder too. She smiles when she sees him, quietly whispering, “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” He greets, sitting up. Willow turns to prop herself up on her elbows.

“When did you get up?” She asks, Hunter shrugging.

“I’m just up,” He replies, Willow squinting at him suspiciously but not commenting on it. She just sits all the way up, grabbing her glasses off of the end table and putting them on. She looks back at where the kitchen is, Hunter following her gaze to see the kitchen light on. Willow immediately gets up, extending a hand to Hunter, who takes it and gets up. Something in him doesn’t let go once he stands, though, walking hand in hand with Willow towards the kitchen. There it is again, that fluttery feeling in his chest. He’s thankful Flapjack isn’t here to chirp annoyingly at him about it.

When they walk into the kitchen, Hunter sees Mrs. Noceda bent over something in a cabinet facing away from them. Willow glances back a minute before nervously calling, “Mrs. Noceda.”

“You can call me Camila, what’s up, car-” She looks back, staring in shock a moment before quietly laughing, a smile on her face, “What happened last night?”

Hunter feels himself flush red with embarrassment, letting Willow take up for answering that question. “We uh, had a bit of a spontaneous haircut. But we cleaned up! Don’t worry. But we do need some help. I tried but I’m not the best with scissors.”

“I see, you still did a surprisingly good job, but let me help you out. Go to the bathroom, I’ll be right there,” She tells them, Willow nodding. She turns around and looks back at Hunter, who still has her hand, and walks them back through the living room and down the hallway, into the bathroom. The lid of the toilet is still down, Hunter taking a seat while Willow turns on the light. She moves out of the way of the door to let Flapjack fly in, Hunter holding out his cupped hands to let him fly into them and look up at him.

“Good morning buddy, good to see you got up,” He teases, Flapjack hopping in his hands and quipping back.

“Saw hands, with flower girl! Tell flower girl?”

“Nevermind, go back to bed,” He dismisses the bird, Flapjack flying up onto his shoulder and butting his head against Hunter’s cheek. Hunter just reaches over and scratches the bird’s head, looking up to see Mrs. Noceda walking in, smiling and shutting the door behind herself.

“Alright, let’s see what I can do to help,” She says, going into the cabinet under the sink and pulling out a strange, black device with ridges on the top of it, admittedly very scary looking. She takes out another black, plastic piece and puts it over the silver ridges that were there before. Thankfully, Willow asks so he doesn’t have to.

“What’s that?” She questions.

“Oh, these are clippers, they’re meant to buzz hair,” She describes, plugging it into the wall, “They won’t hurt at all, I’ll show you both, see,” She turns it on, Hunter hearing the strange machine start to buzz. She goes to Willow first, touching the tip of it to her hand, Willow nodding. Mrs. Noceda turns to Hunter next, Hunter hesitantly holding out his hand too. The machine vibrates a lot and violently, Hunter quickly drawing his hand back and shaking it out to try to get the weird feeling of vibrating out of it. He didn’t like that, he’ll have to add ‘clippers’ to his list of things he doesn’t like touching.

“Yeah, they’re a little weird,” Mrs. Noceda smiles and nods, “But they won’t feel like that against your head, you don’t have to worry. Are you alright with me starting to work on it, cariño?”

“Mhm,” He affirms, taking Flapjack off his shoulder so he doesn’t get accidentally eaten by the weird vibrating machine. Mrs. Noceda starts to clip away at the bottom half of his hair, which he normally has buzzed really short.

“So, last night, do you want to talk about what happened?” She asks, Hunter tensing up and rambling for a reason.

“Just- Uh- I just- I didn’t-”

“It’s ok, we don’t need to talk about it,” She assures him, “Don’t feel like you need to tell me, I’m here to help regardless of how it happened.”

Hunter just hums in affirmation, the feeling of embarrassment beginning to tug at him again. He was able to break that habit with Willow last night, letting himself trust her enough to know she doesn’t shame him for this stupid choice. But he’s really uncomfortable with Mrs. Noceda, and especially after everything she’s done for him he causes this big mess she has to fix. The stress

must be radiating off of him, though, because Flapjack looks up at him, staring before getting up and flying over to Willow, Hunter looking up to see him dragging her.

“Flapjack!” Hunter quips at him, “What are you doing? Come back here, come back.”

“Flower girl help,” Flapjack tells him.

“No, come back,” Hunter holds his hand out, Flapjack flying back to sit on it, just looking up at him and chirping again.

“Help!” He argues, *“Hunter let girl help.”*

“You’re getting way too articulate, buddy,” Hunter shakes his head, looking up at Willow as she walks over and sits down in front of him, smiling.

“How are you?” She asks.

“I’m fine,” He tells her, squeezing his eyes shut to suppress a cringe when a piece of hair brushes his back weirdly.

“Hunter, you can tell her to stop if you want,” She tells him, Mrs. Noceda stopping immediately and turning off the machine, quieting the room.

“Something wrong? Is everything alright?” She asks, coming around to stand in front of Hunter, who tries to look at her with the strongest face he can muster, despite how much he wants to shake the feeling of hair off of him.

“Yeah, everything is ok, everything is fine,” He assures her, Willow glaring at him from the floor. He just shakes his head, repeating, “I’m ok, you can keep going. Sorry.”

“It’s alright, you can always just tell me to stop if you need a break for a minute,” She assures him, Hunter nodding and hating how hair grates against his skin. He keeps really strong, though, picturing himself standing in the throne room, where behavior like this would *not* be tolerated. Willow talks again, though, breaking his focus on his mental image.

“Hunter,” She calls his attention, “You-”

“No,” He stops her, “I’m ok.”

“Alright, if you insist,” She nods, Flapjack giving his opinion.

“Listen!” He chirps, *“Flower girl right.”*

Hunter just dismisses him, looking back up at Willow. She smiles at him, Hunter giving her a tight smile back. Her face drops to concern, but she doesn’t press anymore. He’s thankful for it because he really doesn’t want to talk about anything right now. He puts all his focus on not moving at all, keeping still to let Mrs. Noceda finish up with his hair.

A couple of minutes go by and she finally turns off the clippers, Hunter looking back at her wrapping them up.

“I’m all done with that part, but I want to clean up the top if that’s alright,” She tells him, Hunter nodding. She puts back the clippers as she continues, “It’s going to be a little short, as much of a good barber you are, Willow, it’s a little uneven and I want to cut it down to all be even and look natural.”

“I tried not to cut too much but I’ve only ever cut my hair before,” Willow chimes in.

“You did a surprisingly good job with that being your experience,” She comments, going into the drawer and taking out the scissors. She walks back up behind Hunter, who moves back to looking forward and keeping very still. He was really hoping she’d brush off the hair from the back of his neck but she didn’t. He doesn’t ask her to, though, as much as both Willow and Flapjack glare at him like he should have. He didn’t think that was the right time, time is valuable and he’s wasting hers right now.

Mrs. Noceda starts snipping away at more hair, silence falling over the room. Hunter is appreciative of it, though, because at least he can focus on being still without having to hold a conversation too. He doesn’t miss Willow’s concerned glances, but he tries to keep his eyes away from her. It’s hard for him, though, something about her is too captivating to make him look elsewhere. He has yet to figure out what’s wrong with him and *why* he can’t peel his eyes away from her. Maybe she’s luring him in with magic, but he’s pretty sure that plant magic doesn’t do this to someone. Maybe she’s having Gus do it, Hunter’s understanding of illusion magic is pretty lackluster, but he’s pretty sure that can do this either. Glyphs, maybe? No, not those, he’s pretty sure they haven’t discovered that combo yet. Maybe he’ll just never know.

He’s drawn out of his train of thought, though, when Mrs. Noceda taps him on the shoulder, Hunter’s head snapping up to look at her.

“I’m all done,” She tells him, “Look and see if it looks ok.”

Hunter gets up and stands in front of the mirror, looking at a haircut that’s very similar to his old one, just a lot shorter. It swoops up a bit at the front, still just as fluffy as it used to be, but still different. It’s very comforting, oddly, how different looking yet familiar feeling the haircut is. He smiles, looking over at Mrs. Noceda. “I- I like it a lot, thank you, ma’am.”

“No ma’am, just Camila, and I’m glad you like it,” She smiles, ruffling his hair, “You look very handsome with the new haircut, cariño, I used to cut my husband’s hair like this all the time, the style suits you as well. I’m sure he’s glad I’ve gotten some use out of those clippers, they were collecting dust.”

Hunter feels himself blush a bit, shyly smiling and replying, “Thank you.”

“Of course, now-”

“Mamá!” Luz yells from the other room, “¿Dónde estás?”

“Hold on, Luz!” She yells back, going into the mirror cabinet and pulling out a strange white bottle as she asks, “Are you alright with cleaning up, you two? I’m sorry, I don’t want Luz to come in here looking for me.”

“Yeah, we can, Camila, you don’t need to worry,” Willow steps up, Hunter looking back to see her standing up.

“Perfect, so I don’t know how you cut hair in the demon realm but this is baby powder, you can sprinkle it on your neck to get the hair off of it easier. And this, too,” She takes out another strange object from the cabinet, with some white roll of something on a black holder that Hunter has never seen before. “This is a lint roller, it’s sticky, so you can just take off the used layer of sticky tape like this and roll it over your clothes,” She explains as she takes off the tape out the outside, revealing another layer of sticky stuff. “Does that make sense?”

“Mhm, yes, thank you,” Willow replies, everyone looking back when Luz calls again.

“Mamá!”

“Coming, coming,” She calls back, heading towards the door, “Come and get me if you need anything, ok? Oh, and don’t bother with the hair on the ground, I’ll come clean it up with a vacuum while you eat breakfast.”

“We will,” Willow nods, Mrs. Noceda smiling before leaving the room, shutting the door behind herself. The moment she’s gone Hunter can’t help but cringe hard, every muscle in his body tensing up as the feeling of hair all over him catches up to him and *fast* . Flapjack flies out of his hands and onto the sink and Willow immediately rushes over to help, though, putting one hand on his arm that rubs very hard and comfortingly, the other brushing off the back of his neck. The feeling has built up for too long and just one arm rubbing isn’t helping. He lets her finish, though, because she’s trying to help him and he doesn’t want to fault her for helping. When she finishes she steps up to the side of him, Hunter turning to look at her and trying to suppress how on edge he is. He fails, though, twitching and cringing a bit, Willow furrowing her brow at him.

“Are you ok?” She asks, “Can I do anything to help?”

Hunter knows what *could* help, he really *really* wants a hug right now, one of her really tight squeezes, but he couldn’t ask for that at all. She’s done so much for him, he doesn’t want to take anymore. Curse Flapjack and his extremely close connection with Hunter, though, because he seems to pick up on that right away.

“Ask flower girl! Ask flower girl help,” He chirps, *“Flower girl help, nice girl. Pretty girl!”*

Hunter feels his cheeks heat up at the stupid comment, trying to shake it off, telling the bird, “Flapjack.”

“Hunter,” Flapjack flies up to him and tugs at his hair, Hunter pulling his head away.

“Fine, fine,” He dismisses, Flapjack settling back on the sink. Hunter looks up at Willow, eyes dancing around the room before he looks down and quietly mumbles, “Can I have a hug?”

“Hm?” She hums, leaning closer to him, “Sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

Hunter curses at himself for not just getting it over with and saying it louder, working up the courage before blurting out, “Can I have a hug?”

“Oh, yeah! Of course,” She smiles, immediately pulling him in. The moment she tightly wraps her arms around him he begins to feel the tension shooting around his body start to fade away, watching as Flapjack hops over to the other edge of the sink to look at Hunter.

“Flapjack right,” He dramatically tweets, *“Help Hunter.”*

Hunter just sticks his tongue out at the bird, Flapjack seemingly very satisfied with his work as he settles to sit down on the counter, Hunter pulling himself closer to Willow. This weird, close-holding thing that was only introduced to him a little over a month ago was never really something he cared that much for, but for some reason with Willow it’s so much different. Well, a lot of things are different with her, it’s a working hypothesis that he’s trying to puzzle out.

She holds him for a long time, Hunter adoring every moment of it. She calmly rubs his back, keeps him grounded, and lets him wrap himself around her as close as he can go. He really didn’t know how much he loved touching someone until now, before this he hadn’t been touched beyond brief

pats on his shoulder for a good performance on missions. But he loves it so much, and a lot of him doesn't want to let go in hopes of making up for the time that he lost in the castle.

Willow, admittedly, doesn't let go either, Hunter having to take a step back when he feels like he's been in it for too long. Willow warmly smiles at him, asking, "Feel better?"

"Uh, yeah, thanks," He awkwardly answers, Willow just picking up the strange white bottle Mrs. Noceda set out.

"So, she said this will help get the hair off your neck," She tells him, nervously reaching up and turning the cap, the holes turning from closed to open. The two look at each other in nervous confusion, Willow laughing before telling him, "Ok, now or never, turn around and let me see what I can do."

Hunter turns around, looking in the mirror to see Willow shaking the white powder on the back of his neck, brushing the hair right off it. She smiles, looking at him through the mirror.

"Wow! Look at that, I wish we had that last night," She comments as she continues to work around his neck, Hunter watching in fascination as this strange powder takes off all the hair from his skin, relief washing over him as he doesn't feel it crawling all over him anymore. When she finishes with that, Willow sets the powder down and grabs the 'lint roller', very apprehensive beginning to roll it on his shirt. That, impressively, gets rid of the hair on his shirt too. She goes all the way around his neck, down his back and on his sleeves. It all comes off, too, the weightless feeling of no more stupid cut hairs on him feeling really good. When she finishes and sets down that too, she grabs his shoulders and spins him around to face her, widely smiling at him. Hunter looks at her confused, unsure of why she's looking up at him *so* smiley.

"Is there something wrong?" He asks, looking around at himself.

"No! You just look nice with your new haircut," She tells him, "I like it a lot. Well, I liked your long hair too but this suits you very well."

Hunter immediately deeply blushes, feeling it go all the way up to his ears, which twitch excitedly at the compliment. Flapjack hops on the counter, singing to him.

"Pretty girl like Hunter! Hunter like pretty girl!" He teases him, bouncing up and down, *"Flapjack see!"*

"Flapjack, shh," Hunter silences the bird, holding out his hand for him to fly onto. Hunter looks back at Willow, sheepishly replying, "Uh, thanks, and thank you for your help, too."

"I'm glad I could help! And I'm glad Camila was able to tidy your hair up a bit, make it look much nicer," She tells him, looking behind him when someone knocks on the door, both of them stilling until they hear Mrs. Noceda calls inside.

"Come get breakfast," She calls into the room, "No rush, but it's on the table."

"Thank you," Willow calls back to her, looking at Hunter, "Do you want to go to breakfast?"

"Yeah, yeah, we can go," He nods, Willow smiling, looking down before taking Hunter's hand, Hunter just letting her guide him out of the room and over to the kitchen, Flapjack flying up onto his shoulder before he leaves the room. Hunter's heart drops when she lets go of it before she gets in the kitchen, though. She's probably ashamed of associating with him, but he doesn't get to wallow in that feeling for very long, because every eye in the room shoots over to him when he walks in. There's an awkward bit of silence when he sits at the table, between Gus on his right and

Willow on his left. Gus is the first to speak.

“I like the haircut,” He chimes in, “It looks good.”

Hunter gives him a small smile, looking over when Luz adds, “Yeah, you look like my dad.”

Hunter immediately takes that as an insult, because *why* would Luz want someone like Hunter looking like someone important to her. After a moment, though, she clarifies.

“I like it, though, it’s a good thing,” She assures him, Hunter silently sighing with relief. Mrs. Noceda walks over and hands both Hunter and Willow plates with their food, Willow thanking her and Hunter just smiling. He just really hopes she understands that last night was long and he’s still working down from it.

“Where’s Vee?” Luz asks, “Is she not coming down?”

“She’s still sleeping, I didn’t want to wake her so I’ll just heat up her food when she gets up,” Mrs. Noceda answers, “I think she was up pretty late last night.”

“Oh, I hope she’s ok,” Luz replies, Mrs. Noceda looking back and smiling.

“She’s alright, mija, don’t worry. Sometimes some nights are rough,” She says, Luz nodding. The table goes quiet, but only for a moment. Luz starts up pretty quickly with talking about her Azura books, her and Amity going back and forth about it for a while. Mrs. Noceda leaves them to probably go off and clean up the bathroom. At some point, Willow starts talking, too, although Hunter is completely zoned out. When Mrs. Noceda comes back in and asks what she’s talking about, she dives right into a detailed explanation of Flyer Derby, her passion captivating Hunter immediately. He only stops when he hears his name, jumping a bit.

“What?” He questions, Willow looking over at him and smiling.

“Oh, I was just telling everyone how you won us the first Flyer Derby game, remember?” She asks, Hunter nodding.

“Oh, yeah, yeah,” He nods, “That was fun.”

“Yeah, I miss it, I wish we could play here but I know it’s too dangerous, someone might see,” She replies, Flapjack flying from his shoulder onto the table in front of him to annoyingly chirp.

“Hunter like pretty girl!”

“Flap, shh, not now,” He brushes him off, feeling his cheeks heat up.

“Now, Hunter watch pretty girl,” Flapjack teases, *“Hunter red.”*

“Flapjack!” He quietly exclaims, feeling blush start to creep up to his ears, “Who taught you that?”

“What’s he telling you?” Willow asks, Hunter perking up and scrambling for a lie.

“Nothing, nothing, he’s not telling me anything,” He quickly dismisses, “He uh- just- just talking about- the weather?”

“The weather?” She questions, everyone at the table looking at Hunter suspiciously.

“Yeah, yeah, the weather, he uh, wants to go outside today?” He nervously lies, seemingly satisfying everyone sitting at the table because they nod in understanding. Hunter sighs in relief,

glaring at Flapjack on the table.

"Flapjack help," He pridefully tweets back, Hunter rolling his eyes and offering his finger for Flapjack to fly up onto, perching him back on his shoulder. He looks over when Amity comments something.

"Flapjack talks to you a lot, Hunter, Ghost never speaks to me. She's only ever told me her name" She says, reaching into her lap to pet the cat he didn't even realize was there.

"Clover has talked to me once or twice, but not as much as Flapjack," Willow adds, "Never casually, though, always just if I need advice on something, if I talk to her she normally doesn't talk back."

Gus adds on, "Emmy too, she splats me with her tongue sometimes, though."

"What do they say, though?" Luz asks, "Like how do you hear words out of just chirps, Hunter?"

Hunter shrugs, "I just do, I don't know. Flapjack talks to me a lot, about a lot of things. He comments on things, talks about people, he's a bird with a lot of opinions."

"Flapjack right," He chirps, Hunter indicating to his shoulder.

"He just told me he's right," He tells them, reaching up to scratch Flapjack's head, "All the time, always something to say, buddy."

Amity leans in and asks, "How did you do it? How did you make him talk to you?"

Hunter shrugs his free shoulder, "I don't know, he talked to me from when he found me. It took me some time to understand it but he's been getting more articulate since. Books about palismen tell you that language comes with a lot of time, I don't know what happened with Flapjack."

"Owlbert used to talk to Eda, she understood him really well but he didn't do it nearly as much as Flapjack does to you," Luz chimes in, "He lied for me once, but Eda didn't believe it. I don't know how he talks, though, I never asked because it never happened that often. I don't know what's different with Flapjack."

"Flapjack trust Hunter," Flapjack quietly chirps to him, Hunter just smiling but not transmitting that to anyone else.

"Clover has only ever said a couple of words at a time," Willow tells her, "I don't know if that's how they all talk, though."

"Palismen get more articulate the longer they've had a bond with you. The exposure to their specific magic composition takes time to settle and connect with you, so while the connection to a palisman happens pretty quickly the deepening of that bond takes a lot of time. Not a lot of research has been done on it, though, or at least it wasn't in any of the banned books I stole from the Castle library. The way they speak and what they say is normally pretty personal person to person, most researchers only know about their own palismen," Hunter tells them, omitting how Flapjack told him that the reason he talks so much is because he trusts Hunter. He wouldn't want to make the others feel bad about their bonds with their palismen. Everyone nods, Amity questioning.

"So the longer Ghost and I are together, the more she'll talk?"

Hunter nods, "In theory, yeah."

“That’s really cool,” Gus comments, Willow looking over at Hunter and smiling.

“You know a lot about palismen, Hunter,” She comments, “If I ever have questions about Clover, can I come to you?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah of course,” He nods, looking down at the table when he feels his ears twitch a bit. He doesn't even get a moment to process it, though, because Amity immediately questions.

“So, banned books in the Castle? What were they about? How many did you read? I watched books get taken a lot when I was working at the library and a lot of them seemed really interesting, but I never got to know what most of them were about. Obviously, they got confiscated, that’s the point,” She rambles, “But what did you read? What do you know?”

Hunter takes a moment to sort through everything she just said, admittedly overwhelmed by everything she just said. He gets a handle on it, though, replying, “Most of them were books on wild magic.”

“And you had access to them?”

“Oh, no, I wasn’t supposed to. I stole them from storage to read, if I got caught I would have been in trouble,” He explains, “Well, I was caught once, and, yeah, I got in a lot of trouble.”

“Good for you, stealing from an oppressive authority,” Luz enthusiastically replies, pausing before curiously asking, “But what kind of trouble? Like grounded trouble or what? Is that even a thing on the Boiling Isles?”

Hunter immediately stills, knowing that Luz absolutely had innocent intentions but also that the question was *definitely* too far for him. He panics for a way to get out of answering it or at least answer it in a breakfast-friendly way, but he can’t puzzle out a way to do it. Thankfully, he doesn’t have to, because with one glance at him Willow takes up for chiming in.

“I got grounded when we got expelled, so I’m guessing it’s the same thing,” She adds, looking over at Gus with almost a desperate look to add on.

“Yeah, yeah, my dad grounds me all the time, but my illusion me normally serves the time,” Gus adds, smiling proudly, “Yeah, I think my dad knew, but he was just happy I was acting like a normal teenager.”

The conversation moves away from Hunter, thankfully, Hunter looking over at Willow to see her winking at him, Hunter knowing she saw he was struggling to answer Luz and stepped up to help. He cracks a smile back at her, feeling Flapjack butt his head into his cheek. Hunter scratches his head, savoring how the bird leans into his hand. It’s odd, not feeling hair when he pets the bird on the shoulder. It’s nice, and he’s sure Flapjack likes it too.

Luz and Amity get up from the table first, Mrs. Noceda coming over and beginning to clear plates. The other three of them get up, too, Hunter separating himself from the chattering group. He goes back into the living room, heading over to the bookshelf and looking at the selection of books on the shelf. He contemplates doing some more research, but he really just wants to relax for now. Instead, he picks up the *Cosmic Frontier* book he’s been reading, figuring that would be a much more calming read right now. Although, like he senses it through the air, Gus comes bounding into the room right after he sits in his corner of pillows and goes to start reading, lighting up when he sees the book in Hunter’s hands.

Gus points at it, “Hey I just read the last one, I’m so nervous that-”

“Hey hey, no spoilers! I’m not there yet,” Hunter stops him, Gus relenting.

“Ok, ok, I’ll leave you to it, but let me know when you get to *that* part,” He winks at him, Hunter just laughing and smiling before nodding at him.

“I will, I will,” He assures him, Gus walking back out of the room to the group of them loudly chatting in another part of the house. Hunter barely gets two lines into the book, though, because Flapjack hops down on top of the book, looking up at him. “Hey, what’s up?” Hunter asks him, Flapjack happily tweeting back.

“Flapjack like hair,” He tells him, Hunter beaming down at the bird, *“Hunter look nice.”*

“Thanks, Flap, I think so too,” He replies, reaching out and rubbing Flapjack’s head with his thumb, Flapjack leaning into it before flying up to the top of his head and beginning to rustle around, settling in up there. Hunter looks up even though he can’t see him at all, laughing and commenting, “Are you making a nest up there?”

“Flapjack like hair,” He says again, Hunter just smiling and going back to his book, pulling his knees up so he can hold the book on top and he doesn’t have to tilt his head down. He feels the weight of Flapjack settling up there, letting himself just get lost in what he’s reading. It’s odd how quickly something so huge for him blew over. It’s never been like this before with him, it always takes *hours* to work himself down from something like that. He can’t keep his mind from wandering, asking himself *why* that change seemed to happen so suddenly.

But right after he poses himself the question, he answers it: Willow. He doesn’t know what she did to him, or what’s different about her, or *why* he can’t seem to take his eyes off of her when she’s in the room, but something about her is so calming to him. It’s some special ability he has, and maybe one day he should tell her about it.

For today, though, he’ll settle for just basking in it.

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